

Currently, approximately 7,000 people live in Beočin. The industrial town lies at the foot of the Fruška Gora mountain, a 90-minute drive from the capital Belgrade. The cement factory was bought from French company Lafarge in 2015 and merged with Holcim to become LafargeHolcim. In May, an announcement was made that the world's largest producer of construction materials would from then on be known simply as Holcim Ltd and its headquarters were moved to the tax haven of Zug.

Before the takeover, the Beočin cement factory was already one of the main polluters in former Yugoslavia, which was finally broken up in 2008. However, the decision taken by management shortly after the acquisition to stop running the ovens on natural gas in favour of the far cheaper and dirtier petroleum coke caused a significant deterioration of the situation. Petroleum coke is a by-product from oil refineries; burning it at extremely high temperatures produces high quantities of micro particles, sulphur dioxide and soot. The inspectorate's report, of which we have a copy, was sent directly to the responsible federal public prosecutor. One and a half years later, however, it remains unclear when - or indeed whether - a case against Holcim will be opened.

The environmental authorities analysed all available data for the period of 31 August to 21 November 2019. According to its findings, in September emissions of hydrogen chloride (HCl) exceeded the legal limit by 200% on 62 occasions. In October, alongside hydrogen chloride, the factory emitted sulphur dioxide (SO₂), ammonia (NH₃) and nitrogen oxide (NO_x) in quantities that also exceeded the respective legal limits by over 200% on 847 occasions. In November, the quantities were even slightly higher.

According to the inspectorate, in these three short months some 963 tonnes of waste were burnt. The waste is technically classified as toxic, but was not treated accordingly. The inspectorate's report holds that Holcim should be obliged to take immediate measures to address the breaches of legal limits. In addition, on the last page it states that an official complaint on these illegal practices is to be lodged with the responsible court. Confronted with the findings of the report, a speaker from Holcim Serbia stated that "we complied with the decisions and recommendations made by the authorities at the time". She refused to provide details, stating "we are not aware of any legal proceedings against us".

Zlatko Todorčevski, an environmental activist from Beočin, considers that the investigative report and the allegations are a "political manoeuvre to distract attention". "They are all just putting on a show", he states. He reports "very plausible rumours" that the audit of the Holcim factory was nothing but a response to the increasing pressure from other Chinese factory operators, who are rumoured to be to blame for the environmental pollution in Serbia for which they - in contrast to their European competitors - have come under regular criticism in the media. "The authorities simply wanted to show that they have Holcim on their radar, but they don't want to change anything about the situation".

Given that there are no government-run waste incinerators in Serbia, for years part of the

waste has been disposed of via cement factories - officially for purely environmental reasons, something that environmental groups contest. A representative of an organisation called Spasimo Beočin ('Let's save Beočin') states that the air filters in Holcim ovens are designed for dust from cement, but not for the toxins that are released when toxic waste is incinerated. "They believe that the high temperatures destroy all toxic substances, but that is incorrect." Spasimo Beočin is an association of concerned citizens that has been active since 2015. Members of the organisation do not act publicly and their names are unknown. They want this to remain the case - "otherwise we'll face reprisals. Many of us work for the company, others have relatives or friends who earn their living there", the critics of Holcim state by way of explanation for their wish for anonymity.

Since its entry into Serbia, Holcim has enjoyed the full support of the local and national authorities, for the interests of large foreign investors has always been more important than those of nature and the population. This is also reflected in environmental legislation. Companies like Holcim's concerns carry weight in the process of developing them, according to the representative of Spasimo Beočin.

Jovan Ignjatović is the only one of the dozen particularly heavily impacted inhabitants who publicly criticises the operators of the cement factory. The reason: "I'm simply too old to be afraid. Our friends and relatives should be able to continue working there, but they really must stop poisoning us" he demands and feeds his chickens while new clouds of dust settle on his land. Together with his neighbours he has lodged numerous complaints - with the factory, the environmental authorities and the community. After some back and forth, Holcim provided him with an unofficial compensation payment of nearly CHF 800 and that was it. "What am I supposed to do with this money? Previously they were talking about CHF 12,000 for resettlement, but nothing ever came of it".

For Beočin there is no official health data and none of the doctors we contacted were willing to provide an estimate. The only available data come from the town's Serbian Orthodox cemetery. Of the 99 people who were laid to rest there from 2017 to 2019, 27 of them (i.e. 27.3%) died of cancer. In 2018, the figure was 36%. The average rate in Serbia for the same period was 21%.

Source: publice.ch